Intentions in Words

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Philosophers take a great deal of interest in the study of meaning, reference, truth and other semantic properties, but remarkably little attention has been paid to the entities that have semantic properties. The view that's typically taken for granted has two closely related components:

- (1) There is a distinction between types and tokens. Types are abstract objects, for instance patterns. Tokens are concrete particulars, for instance sounds or inscriptions. A particular is a token of a type, T, if and only if it stands in some appropriate relation to T. If T is taken to be a pattern, the relevant relation is the instantiation relation.
- (2) The abstract entities that are sign types are semantically and syntactically neutral objects. They have their semantic and syntactic properties contingently, through conventions.

This is what David Kaplan in "Words" calls the Type-Token Model. He argues that it both fails to capture our ordinary (pre-theoretical) concept of a word and is detrimental to work in philosophy. As an alternative Kaplan presents what I'll call an *intentional* theory of words. A theory of words is intentional if it says that it is a necessary or sufficient condition for something being a token a word that the producer of the token was in a certain intentional state at the production time (intentionalist theories differ in how they describe the required intentional state). I call the claim that this is a necessary condition *the Necessity Thesis* and that claim that it's a sufficient condition *the Sufficiency Thesis*.

In part One I outline Kaplan's view and present counter-examples to it. Part Two argues that languages must have non-intentionally individuated word tokens. I end with a brief outline of an alternative to both intentionalism and the Type-Token Model.

The immediate target of the arguments below is Kaplan's theory of words, but it's important to keep in mind that a number of philosophers hold views similar

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to Kaplan's. Proponents of related views include Sylvian Bromberger [1989], Michael Devitt [1982], Peter Geach [1957], Paul Grice [1989], Ruth Millikan [1984] and Mark Richard [1990]. Connections to these related views will be pointed out as I go along, but to simplify exposition the focus is on Kaplan's theory.

Part One: Kaplan on Common Currency Words

According to Kaplan, "utterances and inscriptions are *stages* of words, which are *continuants* made up of these interpersonal stages along with more mysterious *intra*personal stages" (p.98).¹ Someone introduces (which for Kaplan is to create) a word (in the simplest case by a dubbing). She then passes this on to others by producing sounds or inscriptions (these are the *inter* personal stages of common currency words). This input is stored 'in' others speakers' memory (these are the *intra*personal stages of common currency word), who later pass the word on to others by producing utterances or inscriptions. And so it goes on. The common currency word is the entire big thing starting with the introduction/creation, including all the *inter-and-intra*personal stages. Obviously a very strange thing.²

What, according to Kaplan, is it for me to utter (or inscribe) the same word as I have heard (or seen) you utter (or inscribe) before? Kaplan's answer is surprising in that he emphatically denies what seems so obviously true:

The first thing that we should get out of our head is the idea that we can tell whether the input and the output are utterances of the same word by looking (or listening to) the physical object that comes out, and looking at (or listening to) the physical object that goes in, and trying to make a phonographic comparison of the two to see whether they are similar enough in some specified way (p.106)

If similarity (in relevant respects) isn't relevant, what is? The key notion for Kaplan is *repetition*. If we would characterize the agent as repeating the previous input, he has produced the same word as the input. According to Kaplan, repetition is a *purely intentional notion*. Whether someone repeated depends *only* on the intentional states of that person³. He says that whether what you produce is the same word as the one you previously heard

...is a matter of intrapersonal continuity, a matter of intention: was it repetition? We depend heavily on resemblance between utterances and inscriptions... in order to divine these critical intentions. If it sounds like "duck", it probably is "duck". But we also take account of accent and idiolect and all the usual clues to intention. *It is the latter that decides the matter.* (p. 104, my it.)⁴

Why does Kaplan think common currency words are philosophically important? He makes two claims on their behalf. First he says that the common currency conception captures our 'pre-theoretic notion' of a word better than what the traditional type-token model does: "I think that the token/type model is the wrong model for the occurrence/word distinction (i.e. the utterance/words distinction).....I want us to give up the token/type model in favor of a stage/continuant model" (p.98). He also claims that his theory is implied by the causal theory of reference. If, like me, you believe in the causal theory and in implications of what you believe, you should, if Kaplan's claim is correct, believe in his theory of words.

Counter-Example To the Sufficiency Thesis

A proponent of the sufficiency thesis holds that in order to produce a token of a certain word it is sufficient for the producer of the token to be in some intentional state at the production time. According to Kaplan, the intentional state is that of standing in the repeating relation to a previous interpersonal stage of a common currency word.

Suppose I'm asked to produce a token of "I" (suppose this is the name of something.) Now, suppose I end up producing this token:



According to Kaplan, if I were in the appropriate intentional state at the production time (i.e., if I stood in the repeating relation to a previous input of "I") I have produced a token of "I". As we have seen, Kaplan emphasizes that whether someone stands in this relation to a previous input is a purely intentional matter; you can't tell for sure whether someone repeats a previous input by looking at what she has produced (see the quote from p. 104).

Now, it's certainly possible that I was in the relevant intentional state while trying to produce my token of "I". The strange result could be due to an entirely non-intentional mechanical malfunctioning at the 'output end' of my action (maybe someone bumped into my hand). Kaplan's view implies that I have produced a token of "I". I take this to be a clearly counterintuitive consequence, and as such evidence that Kaplan doesn't correctly describe how we individuate words.⁵

If there were overwhelming evidence in favor of the Sufficiency Thesis, it might be worth ignoring the intuitions appealed to above. I'll discuss only one attempt to defend it.

Apparent Support for Sufficiency

Sometimes speakers are exceedingly sloppy in their sign production. Sometimes very strange looking tokens are treated as if they were tokens of the words the speaker tried to produce a token of. If it's clear from the context which word she tried to produce, we tend to treat the token as if it is a token of the word she tried to produce. Kaplan seems to think that this shows that as long as the intention is correct anything goes. Hence the sufficiency thesis.

Two quick responses. First, from the fact that we would accept *some* strange tokens as tokens of "l" it doesn't follow that *anything goes*. Cases of sloppiness are borderline cases and the fact that there is a border implies that certain things simply won't do as a token of, say, "l". (The strange token in the counter-example is clearly on the unacceptable side of the border.)

Second, that a peculiar looking entity is *treated as* a token of, say, "1", doesn't imply that it is a token of "1". What these cases show is that charity in interpretation often extends to the classification of ink marks, sounds etc. In some cases we overlook the fact that the speaker didn't produce a token of the word she tried to produce. We know which word she tried to produce and since we are interested in what she has to say⁶ (rather than in her ability to produce word tokens), we give the speech act the interpretation we would have given it had the speaker managed to produce a token of the word we know she tried to produce. In so doing we don't commit to the produced entity being a token of the word she tried to produce.

Counter-Example to the Necessity Thesis Suppose I find the following token on the street:

CAN YOU SPARE A QUARTER?

I pick it up and use it (rather than my voice) to ask people whether they can spare a quarter. When I do this, I use a token of the English sentence "Can you spare a quarter?". Now, suppose I find out that the token was produced with the wrong intentions or maybe with no intentions at all (it might be the result of an accidental spilling of ink). A proponent of the necessity thesis would have to say both that the ink mark isn't a token of an English sentence and that I never used it to ask anyone to spare a quarter (because I can't ask a question in English without using tokens of English words). Both claims are preposterous. I have used a token of an English sentence, whatever it's production history might be.

A reply: In reply to this a proponent of the Necessity Thesis could modify his view to say that an entity is a token of a sign only if it is either produced intentionally or is used in the performance of a speech act. (Call this the Modified Necessity Thesis (MNT)). MNT implies that the ink mark isn't a sign token when it is lying on the street but that it becomes a token when it's put to use in the performance of a speech act. So the counter-intuitive consequence that I never used the ink mark to ask someone to spare a quarter is avoided.

MNT still implies the to my mind counter-intuitive claim that the ink mark isn't a token of "Can you spare a quarter?" when it lies on the street. However, I find that appeals to intuitions tend to be inconclusive at this point. A more useful reply at this stage is to challenge proponents of MNT to provide an explanation of *why* we individuate sign tokens in the way they claim we do. The identity conditions for sign tokens were developed by us for a reason. We should expect the distinction between things that are sign tokens and things that are not, to be a distinction that says something about how those entities can be used (something about the function they can perform for us).

These two ink marks:

Can you spare a quarter? Can you spare a quarter?

are, for all linguistic purposes, functionally equivalent. Whatever you can do linguistically with the first, you can do with the second. However, according to MNT it is possible that the first ink mark is a token of "Can you spare a quarter?", but that the second isn't.⁷ If so, the difference between being a sign token and not being a sign token would, in this case at least, be one that does not only tell us something about the linguistic function of the entities so classified. This would be to claim that the classification of entities as sign tokens is about something more than how the classified entities can be used linguistically. This, I argue in Part Two, is to make a fundamental mistake about the nature of sign tokens.

Part Two: The Role of Non-Intentional Entities in Communication

As we have seen, the intentionalist's response to these examples tends to be some attempt to modify the sort of intentions that are claimed to be necessary and/or sufficient for being a word token. One response to such moves is to modify the examples to undermine the new intentionalist suggestions. However, rather than enter into this tedious cat and mouse game of intuition mongering, I'll present what I take to be the underlying basis for the above examples, a basis that shows non-intentionally individuated word tokens to be a necessary condition for communication.

Here is a very compelling beginning of a story about why we go around producing sounds, inscriptions and others things that are sign tokens. We produce sign tokens in order to give others access to our intentional states and others use the tokens we produce to access our intentional states. From a sign producer's point of view, the role of sign tokens can be described as follows. She intends to say something, for instance that Alice is asleep, and she intends to do this in English. She knows that there is an English sentence, "Alice is asleep" an utterance of which expresses the proposition that Alice is asleep. She believes that her audience knows this and that they believe that she believes it, etc.

I think one plausible way to unwrap the "etc" in the previous sentence involves developing a broadly Gricean story about communication, but there are also other theories compatible with that very spare beginning. However, what's important in this context is that any elaboration must include the obvious, viz. that the speaker intends to produce a token of the sentence "Alice is asleep".

How, within the scope of her sign producing intention, should we characterize what she intends to produce, i.e., how must she (the sign producer) think of a token of "Alice is asleep"? The answer *must* be given in non-intentional terms. If

that's not the case, i.e., if her intention is of the form *I* intend to produce *X* with intention t (or: *I* intend to t-intend to produce x^8) this just pushes the question one step back: how must she think of X within the scope of this second order intention? To characterize her intention we must, at some point, use a non-intentional characterization of what she is about to produce.

This argument shows that some non-intentional characterization of what she is trying to produce must be available to *the sign producer*. The importance of this non-intentional entity can also be brought out by thinking about communication from the interpreter's point of view. Call this particular utterance "u":

Alice is asleep

I'll assume that all parties to this debate agree that a necessary condition for being in a position to interpret u is knowledge of semantic facts such as (s)

(s) "Alice" refers to Alice

To use (s) in interpreting u, it must be possible to identify the first token of u as a token of "Alice". How is that done? The non-intentionalist has an easy answer: you look at it. If you recognize its features as being those of tokens of "Alice", you make use of (s). This is how interpretation gets off the ground. We produce sounds or inscriptions to each other and because we have shared knowledge of semantic facts such as (s) and know how to relate sounds, inscriptions etc. to these facts, we gain access to each others intentional states.⁹

Contrast this with the intentionalist view. Had intentionalism been true, looking at the first token of u would *not* enable you to determine whether it is a token of "Alice" and hence wouldn't tell you whether to employ (s) in your interpretation. For all you know, it could be a token of "Jupiter" and refer to Jupiter (this, as we have seen, is left as a possibility by the sufficiency thesis), or it might be not a word token at all (if it was produced without the intentions required by the necessity thesis). Only someone with knowledge of the intentions and history of the utterer of u is in a position to tell which word the first token of u is a token of.¹⁰ Notice that this is information that might not even be available to the speaker.

This defense of non-intentionalism does not assume that interpretation does not involve making assumptions about the speakers intentions. Context sensitive and ambiguous expressions are just the most obvious examples of expressions the presence of which require the interpreter to make assumptions about the speakers intentions. But notice that what triggers the interpreter's search for such intentions is the recognition that an utterance contains a context sensitive or ambiguous expression. It's the presence of expressions such as "you", "that", "Alice" etc. that makes us look for contextual clues to the relevant sorts intentions.

If successful, the argument in this section shows that the presence of nonintentionally individuated sign tokens is a necessary condition for communication as we know it, i.e., communication that relies on knowledge of semantic facts such as (s). The argument provides a basis for the intuitive considerations appealed to in the first part of the paper. It explains why we have those intuitions and shows them to be based on an essential feature of our linguistic practice.¹¹

A Reply: In some passages, Kaplan is strongly dismissive of alternatives to the common currency conception,¹² in other passages he's more accommodating.¹³ But even in his most accommodating moments he insists that "for serious semantics, I think that it is my common currency conception that would be important". (p.111)

What are the serious semantic issues that we need common currency words for? The papers starts with a discussion of substitution problems in attitude contexts and Kaplan says he plans to use his theory of words to solve these problems. As of yet, no such solution has been published, so I won't speculate about those prospects. A more specific claim he makes is that the common currency conception is "implicit" in, for instance, Kripke's work on reference.¹⁴ Mark Richard also bases his intentionalist view of words on the causal theory of reference.¹⁵ If Richard and Kaplan are right, the causal theory implies¹⁶ the common currency conception.

Does the causal theory imply intentionalism? The causal theory says that what someone refers to in uttering a token of a proper name, say a token of "Donald", is determined, in part, by the 'causal' history of that utterance and in part by the intentions¹⁷ of the utterer. Someone refers to a particular person, x, uttering a token of "Donald", by being causally-intentionally related to a series of previous utterances that originates in a dubbing of x.

It simply does not follow from the causal theory that what we call "words" and "word tokens" are individuated the way Kaplan (and Richard) say they are. To see this, notice that no incompatibility results if we combine the causal theory with a non-intentionalist account of how word tokens are individuated. According to this combined theory we should understand the claim CT:

CT: Someone refers to a particular person, *x*, uttering a token of "Donald", in part by being causally-intentionally related to a series of previous utterances that originates in a dubbing of *x*.

as saying something about how the referent of an utterance of a non-intentionally individuated entity, "Donald", is determined. Since no contradiction follows from so understanding CT, the causal theory doesn't imply intentionalism. As far as I can see, the causal theory is neutral on the issue of how words are individuated.

This is not to deny that the causal theory implies that chains of tokens that stand in certain causal-intentional relations to each other play an important role in semantics. The point is only that it doesn't follow from the claim that such chains determine reference that they also pick out the entities that do the referring. Of course, to a certain extent it's Kaplan's terminological prerogative to use the word "word" about whatever he likes. But to choose to call the reference determining chains "words" or "common currency words" is unfortunate because it gives the false impression that the causal theory implies something about how we individuate (or should individuate) those things we call "words" and "word tokens".

Tokens and Conventions

The view that *some* intentional (linguistic) activity is required for there to be sign tokens is a view easily confused with intentionalism. I want to end with some considerations about why this view is right, how it is different from intentionalism, and how it shows the traditional type-token model to be deficient.

It is a matter of convention that what you look at right now are tokens of words. They would not be word tokens if it hadn't been for the presence of certain kinds of conventions.¹⁸ Such conventions are upheld by intentional linguistic activity. So, there can be word tokens only if there is intentional linguistic activity. It's a mistake to infer intentionalism from this. The conventions we have are, very roughly, of two kinds:

- (C1) Entities with such-and-such properties count as tokens of the same sign
- (C2) Entities with properties P (where entities with P count as tokens of the same sign according to some C1-type convention) count as tokens of the same sign as tokens with properties P' (where P' entities count as tokens of the same sign according to some C1-type convention)

C1-type conventions make it the case that these two tokens are tokens of the same-sign: **lobster lobster**. C2-type conventions make it the case that the sounds you make when you read this sentence out loud are tokens of the same signs as the written marks on this page. In other words, C1-type conventions determine the same-sign relation within a sign system (such as spoken, written, Braille, Semaphore etc), while C2-type conventions determine when tokens in different sign systems are tokens of the same sign.

The disagreement between intentionalists and non-intentionalists is over what to put in for "such-and-such" in "such-and-such properties" in C1. The intentionalist says this should include reference to the intentional production history, the non-intentionalist denies this. Both views are compatible with the obvious fact that concrete particulars are word tokens only because of the presence of such conventions and the equally obvious fact that such conventions require intentional activity on the part of sign users.

Conventions and the Type-Token Model

The fact that conventions play an important role in determining when tokens are of the same type suffice to show that something is wrong with the traditional Type-Token model presented at the beginning. This traditional view treats expression types as paradigmatic abstract objects (for instance as patterns) and as such they are often compared to numbers. The Type-Token Model also says that if two concrete particulars stand in the same relation to the same type (e.g. stand in the instantiation relation to the same patter) they are tokens of the same type. However, if the same-sign relation is conventional, then either sign-types are abstract objects that can only exist through conventions (which would disqualify for instance patterns) or the instantiation relation is conventional. The conventional element of the same-sign relation must be introduced, but is missing from the traditional model.

A satisfactory account of these conventions and the mechanism underlying them would require another paper, but the sorts of considerations involved can be indicated briefly. If the conventions can be presented in the form of (C1) and (C2), then two questions must be answered:

- 1. What is it for things with certain properties to *count* as word tokens? Here I suggest that much of what Goodman [1978] has to say about the replica relation is relevant. The basic idea is that concrete particulars count as replicas of each other if they are semantically and syntactically *equivalent* to each other, i.e., if they can be substituted for each other without change in semantic and syntactic properties (see Goodman [1978] p.131)¹⁹
- 2. How should the shared properties be specified? This is largely an empirical question pursued by, among others, phonologists and computer scientists who construct programs that take spoken language as input and have written language as output (and vice versa). It's a complex and difficult enterprise, the details of which are of no philosophical significance.²⁰

I won't attempt to fully answer 1 and 2 here, but I want to mention an answer that's too often ruled out for no good reason by proponents of the Type-Token Model. We might find that in answering 1 and 2 (and in our other attempts to give a theoretical account of C1-and-C2-type conventions) no explanatory work will be done by picking out some one abstract entity as the sign type. That's to say, it might be that reifying sign types would be explanatorily superfluous; it might in no way contribute to giving an account of what spoken, written, Braille, etc, token of "Alice" have in common.

If so, we could treat the property of *being a sign token* as derived from the property of *being a token of the same sign as*. We could say that an entity is a token of a sign if and only if it stands in the same-sign relation to some other entity. C1 and C2-type conventions determine the extension of the same-sign relation and if we don't need to appeal to types in accounting for such conventions, sign types should not be reified.

Goodman can again be used as an illustration. He thinks he can give a complete account of the same-sign relation (what he called the *replica relation*) without reifying types. Goodman's view is motivated by his nominalist sympathies, but the strategy need not be so motivated. It might be that even though it is necessary to appeal to a number of abstract entities in giving an account of (C1) and (C2)-type conventions, no purpose would be served by labeling any of them "sign-type". If so, a central component of the Type-Token Model would be undermined.²¹

Notes

1. Kaplan [1990], unless otherwise noted, all reference are to this article.

2. Millikan's view is similar. She says: "....what makes tokens of a word or sentence tokens of the *same* word or sentence (in the same language) is, in the first instance, *history*, not form or function" Millikan [1984] p.73 (see also p.75)

3. In this respect Kaplan differs from Millikan and Richard. They both emphasize the historical/ causal properties of the sign producer, i.e. such things as causal source of their sign producing act. For the purposes of the arguments that follow this difference is insignificant. All the arguments against what I call intentionalism applies to the view that it's the intentions+history or just the history of the sign producer that individuate sign tokens.

4. Bromberger [1989] also emphasizes the intentional aspect. He says: "Speech utterance are, after all, very different from other noises and articulatory gestures. Unlike other noises, they are produced by agents with phonological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic intentions. They embody and manifest such intentions." (p.73, see also p.71.) The arguments below are directed against this view as well.

5. Notice that this example is equally effective against a view that chooses to construe tokens as events along the lines of Goodman [1951]. This is also a counterexample to the claim that it is sufficient for an event to be what Goodman would call a "l"-event that it was produced with certain intentions.

6. We don't ignore sign producing abilities in all contexts. Any literate person has spent a lot of time in contexts where their sign producing abilities mattered.

7. If the first one was produced intentionally and the second was produced non-intentionally and has never been used in performing a speech act.

8. Where "t-intend" is some sort of intentional state, for instance Kaplan's repetition state (remember, according to Kaplan, whether someone repeats is a purely intentional matter).

9. Even inferential semanticists, like R.Brandom, would agree with this point if modified so it applies to the sentential level. See Brandom [1987], for instance p.151.

10. The above argument also shows that what I call "semantic essentialism" is confused. Semantic essentialism is the view that word have their semantic values essentially. Proponents of this view include Geach, Kaplan, Millikan and Richard.

To see that semantic essentialism is mistaken, consider again someone about to interpret u. She has perceived u. She is attempting to find out what it means. Now suppose she makes use of (s) and that it's an essential property of any token of "Alice" that it has the semantic values it has (obviously absurd if you think there are ambiguous expressions, something Kaplan, Geach and Millikan explicitly reject). This would make (s) useless for someone about to interpret u. If in order to figure out if the first token of u is a token of "Alice" the interpreter must know the semantic value of that token, an appeal to (s) would be superfluous. (s) could be of use only after the semantic value of u's first token has been established, and then we wouldn't need (s) any longer. Obviously, an interpreter needs some notion of a word token that's independent both of its production history and of its semantic value.

11. At the end of Part One I argued that MNT introduces conditions on sign tokens that have no basis in the function/role of sign tokens. If the argument in this part is correct, the function of sign tokens is to be bearers of semantic and syntactic properties and to be exhibited in speech acts. This function can be performed by ink marks that don't have an intentional production history. So there is no rational for the conditions imposed on sign tokenhood by MNT.

12. See for instance p.98.

13. See for instance p.111.

14. Kaplan [1990] pp. 93-95, especially note 7 p.95.

15. See Richard [1990], pp.182-90.

16. If the common currency conception is implicit in the causal theory then it must be implied by it.

17. Kripke says the speaker must "intend when he learns a name to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it" p. 96.

18. The role of conventions is equally obvious when one considers the correlations between different sign systems such as spoken, written and Braille. These are different ways of producing tokens of the same word. The there is no non-conventional same-sign relation between spoken and written token of "Annette", nor between these two tokens:

annette ANNETTE

19. For another illuminating discussion of the "counts as" locution see Searle [1995] Chapter 2.

20. For a discussion of some interesting issues in this area see for instance Bromberger [1989]

21. I'm grateful to Jennifer Church for conversations about earlier drafts of this paper. Comments from an anonymous referee for *Nous* were very helpful. The paper is based on Chapter Three of my dissertation "The Metaphysics of Signs and the Semantics of Quotation". I'm grateful for conversations and comments on that chapter from Charles Chihara, Stephen Neale and John Searle.

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